

Review – International Interventions in Local Conflicts

Written by Harry Booty

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HARRY BOOTY, DEC 24 2011

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Regardless of which of the great 1990's articles on international relations theory one may reflect upon – either Fukuyama's *The End of History* or Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilisations* – it is a commonly accepted that the world hasn't quite gone the way many would have expected it to in the years following the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. The remaining superpower, the US, has not had as easy a time as it may have imagined. The bloody and protracted small wars of the last twenty years seem to be the current norm (rather than that of a liberal peace) and may well be so for the foreseeable future. It is into this intellectual and political milieu that we can place Uzi Rabi's edited collection ***International Interventions in Local Conflicts: Crisis Management and Conflict Resolution since the Cold War***.

Borne out of a 2008 conference at Tel Aviv University, the book's aim is to assess the impact of international intervention on the resolution of local conflicts through an overarching examination of the most serious and influential conflicts of the post Cold-War era. Thus the book takes us from the rise of the Unipolar order of American hegemony through the history of this new order (for example examining interventions in Cambodia, Somalia, Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland), finishing the section with a look at the most politically volatile (and arguably most important) region in contemporary politics – the Middle East. The book rounds off with an analysis of the inter-linkage between the domestic and international factors when considering the viability of interventionism in the 21st century.

To deliver on the above, Rabi has assembled the arguments of sixteen other authors from across the Western world into an examination of the political climate of the world's hotspots in the years since the Iron Curtain fell. Authors contributing to the work are as diverse as they are esteemed, hailing from centres of excellence such as the University of Georgetown, the Institute of Political Science (Hagen, Germany) and King's College London, amongst others. Such authoritative provenance from a wide array of different authors does however come with bad points as well as good. For example, this book, like so many others of its style, suffers from a lack of a clearly sustained argument – e.g. the reader may be considering Yugoslavia in one chapter and American Middle East Strategy in the next. Correspondingly each chapter is replete with its own distinctive style and methodology, which does impact the continuity somewhat. However, how substantial this impact is is perhaps more of a subjective matter – the difficulties are certainly not insurmountable.

An underlying theme of the book is that of the debate on the changing nature of sovereignty. This centres around the idea that a state's sovereignty, long held to be a guarantee of its domestic integrity, has slowly but inexorably morphed into something more than that, becoming a responsibility just as much as it is a right. This interpretation has been drawn from the professed vision of values and human rights of the United States being injected into the international system, thus manifesting itself in the interventions outlined in the previous paragraph; however the book does accept the unavoidable counter argument that words are substantially different from deeds when it comes to diplomacy. The essential conclusion of the book is that sovereign states remain the principal and ultimate actors in international relations, meaning that the inevitable consideration of self-interest will always be the deciding factor in humanitarian intervention, thus limiting its occurrence to when it is diplomatically feasible rather than when it is morally desirable.

The book is however subject to a substantial misfortune: timing. Despite being published in early 2010 the book already seems fatally dated. It is perhaps whilst reading books such as this that one can begin to contemplate how tumultuous a time recent history has been! For example, the book references such events as the capture and continuing imprisonment of Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit (released in October 2011) and the ongoing inability of the US to find Osama Bin Laden (killed by US Navy Seals in May 2011). These are both comparatively small in effect when compared to the major misfortune of timing in the book – the substantial assessment of Middle Eastern politics. As mentioned above, a significant part of the analysis revolves around the nature of the Middle Eastern system as characterised by autocratic regimes and the politics of individuals – i.e. Western considerations of the actions of Mubarak or Gaddafi or Assad etc.

As the past year has seen the ousting of two of the three regimes mentioned above and is, at the time of writing, seen serious challenges posed to Assad in Syria – the book begins to lose some traction. The style of the book – with such close attention paid to the contemporary and the factoring of this into the final analyses of each section and the book at large – means the book would always have become dated fast, with the events of 2011 only serving to speed up

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and dramatically juxtapose the images of the world of late 2011 with that of early 2010.

With the post publication events in mind via the Arab Spring – it is the historical and case study context in which this book retains its value, as much of the predictions for the medium and near term developed in the book are now less useful to scholars and students. The final conclusion of this work is pessimistic; that since individual state sovereignty remains the dominant concept in international relations, prospects for the true merging of morals and politics in the near future look slim. In conclusion, whilst the book is strong in many areas – and is in many ways worth a read for its style and input – a second or twin edition to incorporate the post 2011 landscape would be most welcome.

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